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## DAME NATURE AND LADY LIFE

The relation between the stately and beautiful alliterative poem, *Death and Liffe*, in the Percy Folio Manuscript, and *Piers Plowman* has long been recognized. The central idea of a spiritual conflict in which Death is vanquished by Eternal Life in Christ is embodied in a passage in the vision of Dobet (B XVIII, 27-36; C XXI, 26-35), and there are detailed resemblances which warrant the inclusion of *Death and Liffe* among the poems that continue the tradition of *Piers Plowman* through the succeeding century.<sup>1</sup> But it is only for the last part of the debate, where Life appears in her theological rôle as salvation, that *Piers Plowman* affords an adequate explanation. The earlier and more winsome conception of Life as a personification of the joy of living things and of the kindly power that nourishes them is not to be found in *Piers Plowman* and is entirely foreign to its somber religious atmosphere.

Skeat affirms that the prototype of Lady Liffe is Lady Anima in the vision of Dowel (*Piers Plowman* A, Passus X, 1 ff., etc.), and the latter figure does indeed appear to have furnished the author of *Death and Liffe* with a suggestion. Anima is represented, according to the conventional allegory, as a lady dwelling in the castle of the body. She is the vital spirit or the soul of man. The senses are inclosed in the castle "for love of that ladi that Lyf is i-nempnet," a detail suggestive of the affection which all creatures have toward Lady Liffe. But Lady Liffe is, after all, obviously a different being from Lady Anima, different also from the masculine figure Lyf, who, elsewhere in *Piers Plowman* (B XX, 166 ff.; C XXII, 167 ff.), flies in vain to Fisick for aid against Elde and Deth. She is a goddess, the *magna parens* of living things. The true key to her origin is not to be found in the allegorical psychology of Hugo of Saint Victor, or in the literature of mortification, but on that new Olympus where the mediævalized deities of the pagan mythology hold their state. Her

<sup>1</sup> See Skeat's preface to *Death and Liffe* in *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript*, edited by Hales and Furnivall, III, 49 ff.; also Manly in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, II, 46.

own words, addressed to the destroyer Death, clearly show with which one of these divinities she is to be associated.

& as a theefe in a rout · thou throngeth them to death,  
*that neither nature, nor I · ffor none of thy deeds*  
 may bring up our bearnes.

[*Death and Liffe*, 251-53.]

Dame Liffe is, indeed, but a hypostasis of Dame Nature, a being to whom the Middle Ages, borrowing for her some of the traits and functions of the classical Venus, had given vivid reality as the embodiment of God's creative power. Closer examination of the Anima passage in *Piers Plowman* will reveal the source from which the author of *Death and Liffe* must have derived the first suggestion for a transferal to Life of the attributes of Nature. The castle of Anima was made by Kind. "What sort of thing is this Kind?" asks the poet. Kind, replies Wit,

is creatour · of alle kunne beestes,  
 Fader and foormere · the furste of all thing;  
 That is the grete god · that bigynnyng hedde nevere,  
 The lord of lyf and of liht · of lisse and of peyne.  
 Angeles and alle thing · arn at his wille,  
 Bote mon is him most lyk · of marke and of schap;  
 For with word that he warp · woxen forth beestes,  
 And alle thing at his wille · was wrought with a speche.

[A-text, X, 27-34.]

Having once adopted, from the hint afforded in this passage, the idea of associating the figures of Life and Nature, the *Death and Liffe* poet did not rely on *Piers Plowman* for the details of his picture. He turned rather to the richer image of Nature in the well-known *De Planctu Naturæ* of Alanus de Insulis,<sup>1</sup> a work which had furnished Jean de Meung, Chaucer, and many others with the materials of their descriptions of the Goddess of Kind.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in Wright's *Anglo-Latin Satirical Poets*, Vol. I. My quotations are from the English translation by Douglas M. Moffat, *Yale Studies in English*.

<sup>2</sup> Miss Edith Scamman, whose interesting study of the alliterative *Death and Liffe* (*Radcliffe Studies in English and Comparative Literature*) I did not see until this article was in proof, has noted that certain details in the account of the honor paid to Lady Liffe by living things are paralleled in Dunbar's description of Nature in *The Golden Targe* (93 ff.) and *The Thistle and the Rose* (73 ff.). The explanation of these resemblances is not, as Miss Scamman infers, that the author of *Death and Liffe* knew Dunbar, but that both poets were drawing independently from a common source in *De Planctu Naturæ*, the *Death and Liffe* poet much more extensively than the other. The allusion in *Death and Liffe* to the mysterious mantle (discussed below) is alone

Natura, with Alanus, is the parent of living things. Like Lady Liffe, she appears to the poet in a vision, radiant and goddess-like, crowned with a heavenly diadem. Her neck and breasts are described in terms closely paralleled in the debate. Special emphasis is laid throughout the work on her love function, a characteristic which reappears in the picture of Lady Liffe. At the approach of Natura the instinct of life and love springs up in all things. "The earth, lately stripped of its adornments by the thieving winter, through the generosity of spring donned a purple tunic of flowers." So also as Liffe draws near

blossomes & burgens · breathed full sweete,  
fflowers fflourished in the frith · where shee fforth stepedd,  
& the grasse *that* was gray · greened belieu.

[70-72.]

The similarity of detail at this point in the two descriptions leaves no doubt that the author of *Death and Liffe* is following the account in *De Planctu*. In both poems the fish express their joy; in both the trees bend their branches in honor at the goddess' approach.

These lowered their leaves and with a sort of bowed veneration, as if they were bending their knees, offered her their prayers.

[*De Planctu*, Prose II.]

the boughes eche one  
they lowted to that Ladye · & layd forth their branches.

[*Death and Liffe*, 69-70.]

Even more conclusive is the following. The garment of Nature is allegorically described by Alanus after the model of Boethius, whose *De Consolatione Philosophiæ* he is following throughout. It is ever changing, elusive to the eye, and of a supernatural substance. Similarly the author of *Death and Liffe*, quite unintelligibly, except on the hypothesis that he is echoing Alanus, invests his goddess in a mysterious mantle.

In kirtle & Mantle  
of goodlyest greene · that ever groome wore  
*ffor the kind of that cloth · can noe clarke tell.*

[83-85.]

sufficient to prove that the material came to the alliterative poet directly rather than through the medium of Dunbar. The failure of the argument for Dunbar as a probable influence in *Death and Liffe* disposes of Miss Scamman's further conclusion that the poem must be dated after 1503.

Indeed, the whole passage describing the approach of Liffe (*Death and Liffe*, 57-141) is but an elaboration of suggestions in *De Planctu Naturæ*. In the subsequent narrative of the poet's meeting with Lady Liffe there is also a general similarity with Alanus' work. Not recognizing Liffe at first, he is enlightened by Sir Comfort, as the wondering author of the Complaint is enlightened by Natura herself. Says Comfort:

shee hath ffostered and ffed thee · sith thou wast first borne,  
and yett beffore thou wast borne · shee bred in thy hart.

[127-28.]

Similarly Natura:

Why has recognition of my face strayed from thy memory? Thou in whom my gifts bespeak me, who have blessed thee with such abundant favor and kindness; who, from thy early age, as vice regent of God the creator, have ordered by sure management thy life's proper course; who in times past brought the fluctuating material of thy body out from the impure essence of primordial matter into true being.

[Prose III.]

In view of the substantial identity of Lady Liffe and Alanus' Natura it becomes unnecessary to resort, as Skeat does, to vaguer parallels with the descriptions in *Piers Plowman* of Lady Meed and Holichurche. Thus the crown and gorgeous clothing of Lady Meed are less likely to have been the model of Liffe's jeweled garments than the more elaborately described apparel of Natura, with its wealth of allegorical gems. "And the crown on her head was carven in heaven," says the author of *Death and Liffe*, obviously thinking of the divine origin of Natura "in the inner palace of the impassible heavens." Again, the poet's awe of Lady Liffe and Sir Comfort's "she has fostered and fed thee"<sup>1</sup> are probably derived from the passage already referred to in *De Planctu* rather than from the meeting with Holichurche in *Piers Plowman*.

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<sup>1</sup> The specific phrase in *Death and Liffe* is apparently an echo from *Wynnere and Wastoure*, I, 206. The relations of *Death and Liffe* to this poem and to other alliterative pieces will be dealt with in the introduction to an edition of *Death and Liffe* which Dr. J. M. Stedman and I are preparing for publication in the University of North Carolina *Studies in Philology*.